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Conference Report on the Digital Congress of the German Sociological Association: ‘Society under Pressure’

Mara Kastein

The theme of the 40th Congress of the German Sociological Association (DGS) held this year was ‘Society under Pressure’. It examined various tensions in society such as the tension ‘between rich and poor ..., between political camps and ideologies, between religions and cultural forms, between (re)emerging nations, regions and transnational organisations, between society and nature, between town and country, between generations, and ... between the sexes’.¹

In order to approach a ‘society under pressure’ and social tensions sociologically, different triggers such as climate change, demographic change, migration movements and capitalism (see *ibid.*) were considered.

Berlin was originally intended to be the conference venue, but due to the Covid-19 pandemic, a total of 2,268 people attended 231 sessions and plenary events at the first digital congress of the DGS via Zoom instead. From more than 30 countries around the world (including 607 from Austria, 263 from Switzerland, 100 from the USA and 45 from Japan), an average of 104 people listened to the lectures of all in all 1009 speakers².

‘Please wait. The webinar will start shortly.’

This phrase especially addressed the early birds to the Zoom meeting and myself too

¹ <https://kongress2020.soziologie.de/thema>.

² This is how Hubert Knoblauch, spokesman of this year’s organizing team, sums up the congress in his closing speech.

as the digital ‘greeting’ when joining the opening event a few minutes early. What can be an advantage at face-to-face events is somewhat inappropriate in a digital space: joining in too early can lead to a situation where the organisers are still making the final preparations. The unpredictability of technology was a constant companion of every event, and even if the organizers’ efforts were obvious, technical difficulties were sometimes inevitable. Some participants also used the chat function a bit too trustfully, which – if a person’s chat partner is thrown out of the meeting for technical reasons – could result in the person’s message being sent to everyone.

In his short report titled ‘The Presentation of Self in Digital Life’ (in an allusion to Erving Goffman’s ‘The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life’, 1956), Michael Wetzels describes the meeting rooms at the digital conference as ‘new staging possibilities for participants’. Participants’ decorated backgrounds (often a full wall of books), suggesting that they are well-read, are, of course, also a part of this. Some also chose one of the background images provided online by the DGS (e.g. a public square or construction site in Berlin, or a concert hall) or used their own vacation pictures. Yet others sat in front of a white wall. Wetzels noted humorously that ‘conventional clothing’ ought to convey ‘prestige’ to many of the congress participants.³ On the one hand, this is certainly not to be dismissed. On the other hand, not wearing pyjamas in front of the screen is definitely a sign of respect.

Much like the usual DGS congresses, it was difficult again this time to decide which event to participate in. The ‘simultaneity of millions upon millions of alternatives on the Internet’, which, according to Hubert Knoblauch, has led to mass media showing little interest in reporting on this year’s congress (Knoblauch in the final lecture), makes the selection process a challenge for the participants as well, and often leads people to change ‘rooms’ in the middle of an event. However, this is less noticeable or disturbing than it is at face-to-face conferences.

Anti-migration discourses, diversity, organisational change and feminist ecology - selected insights

I decided to focus on themes such as diversity, migration, organisational change, right-wing extremism and anti-feminism, work and gender, and socio-ecological transformation, climate crisis, and feminism. Below I would like to present some of my personal highlights from the congress.

In the plenum ‘Social Entanglements: (Re)Nationalization Processes and Solidarities’, Anna Amelina (Cottbus) gave an interesting lecture on discourses hostile to migration in the new German states. She asked about the actors who drive this discourse and about the ‘interplay between post-socialist and post-colonial forms

³ <http://blog.soziologie.de/tag/dgs-kongress/>.

of making “migration” foreign’.⁴ She took as her starting point conflicts surrounding integration and diversity in Brandenburg - not least violent attacks on refugees. Drawing on Connell’s concept of masculinity, Amelina identified hegemonic and complicit masculinity among three types of actors: (1) the pioneers (NPD, identitarian movement); (2) the closest supporters (AfD, Pegida, ‘Zukunft Heimat’); and (3) the accomplices, which according to Amelina also includes various municipal and security authorities, such as the police, as well as all those who do not openly oppose these tendencies. All three groups of actors are engaged in a migrantisation of conflicts, which is accompanied by a shift in the boundaries of what can be said and, in the case of migration, is considered to be ‘alien’ to a nation that imagines itself as homogeneous. Discourses hostile to migration combine the disparagement of the migrant ‘other’ with a simultaneous self-victimisation. The self-victimisation that resonates in the narrative of Brandenburg as an ‘overburdened region’ is fed by the lack of recognition of East German life plans and creates a hierarchy between the ‘inferior East’ and the ‘superior West’. According to Amelina, however, this self-victimization is not accidental in the context of migration; rather, the experience of socialist colonialism is transferred here to the process of unification and the strengthening of the European Union (which is viewed by the peripheries as a distanced, hegemonic power). On the one hand, the unification process would have made the GDR or the new federal states a colonised region. In view of the links between the GDR and Vietnam, Angola, or Cuba, however, the new states themselves have a colonial past.

The police organisation, which Amelina only tangentially referred to as a complicit security authority in the anti-migration discourse, moved into the limelight in the lecture ‘Kulturlotsen oder Alleskönner? Das Ideal polizeilicher Personalarbeit im migrationsbedingten Wandel’ by Martin Brüssig, Alexandra Graevskaia, Benedikt Müller and Anja Weiß (Duisburg-Essen), which was about the ideal form of police staffing policy in the face of migration-related change. In the so-called *Ad Hoc* group ‘Organisations under Pressure: Migration, Diversity, and Organisational Change’, the speakers presented the first results from the ongoing BMBF-funded research project ‘Personnel Policy and Diversity Management in the Police’, which is investigating the consequences of migration-related change for police personnel work. The principle of general applicability (see Behr 2016) has been questioned for some time and is becoming increasingly obsolete, not least due to developments such as the demographically induced shortage of young police officers, legal foundations such as the General Equal Treatment Act, or organisational changes such as special

⁴ For a description see: https://www.conftool.pro/dgs2020/index.php?page=browseSessions&form_session=74#paperID615.

recruitment measures or the creation of new organisational units. In addition to the principle of general applicability, police personnel are also assigned to specific areas of interest. On the one hand, language skills are urgently needed and promoted for operations, on the other hand they are met with mistrust, since officers quickly expose themselves to accusations of disloyalty if they do not speak German in operational situations or among themselves. Migrant police officers are often used as 'mediators between cultures', which implies an essentialist understanding of culture and an 'othering'. The speakers summarised that the police organisation uses and (informally) accesses diversity but does not systematically cultivate it or reward it. Ultimately, the police need to think about how they want to deal with specialisation in organisational and formal terms.

'Environmental Disasters, Solidarity and "Science Fiction". Feminist Analyses of Ecologies and Natural Conditions' was the title of a session in the 'Women's and Gender Studies' section of the congress and it was somewhat overloaded in that it had five very rich lectures. Julia Wustmann and Angelika Pöferl (Dortmund) spoke of the re-feminisation of environmental discourse and the feminisation of environmental politics in their lecture "'We Could Be Heroines, Just for One Day?" - Crisis Heroines as Prototypes of a New Social Figure'. The climate activism of the Fridays for Future movement is often referred to in the media as a religion and thus on the one hand is sacralised and rendered inaccessible while on the other hand it is discredited. Significantly, over half of the demonstrators are read as female. Using the example of the media portrayal of climate activist Greta Thunberg, the speakers presented the novel social figure of the 'crisis heroine' as a phenomenon that opens up new spaces for thought and action and points to the erosion of gender relations.

In the other lectures presented in this session, Clean Meat (= in vitro meat) was discussed as a biotechnology that saves us consumers from having to change our behaviour in everyday life and thus continues to nourish the deeply rooted belief in the legitimacy of our 'entitled subject' existence ('Berechtigungssubjekt', cf. Reckwitz 2019) (Sandra Matthäus, Chemnitz). *Caring* was discussed as a political-ecological transformation practice that is not only desirable but absolutely necessary (Christina Katz/ Daniela Gottschlich, Lüneburg), and two lectures dealt with Haraway's concept of 'speculative fabulation' (Josef Barla from Frankfurt and Susanne Völker from Cologne with Stephan Trinkaus from Bayreuth).

All in all, the digital communication of the content worked well. However, it should not be underestimated that a digital congress can also be very stressful, especially because when you are attending it at your desk at home you may feel tempted to still do your regular daily work during the breaks, on the side, or afterwards.

‘To be allowed to see oneself like this once again, that is certainly great luck’

At the end of the congress, after a touching laudatory speech by sociologists Sarah Speck (Frankfurt) and Paula-Irene Villa Braslavsky (Munich), the women’s and gender researcher Regina Becker-Schmidt was honoured as one of ‘the giants on whose shoulders we stand’ (DGS chairwoman Birgit Blättel-Mink) and given an award for outstanding life work as a sociologist. Becker-Schmidt, sitting in her home office with the printed lecture in front of the camera, was visibly overwhelmed by the laudation at the beginning of her speech and said: ‘To be allowed to see oneself like this once again, that is certainly great luck, it has made me really happy. I am 83 years old ... Now it can be over, now I can do something else’. Thereupon she began her lecture titled ‘Critique as the Ferment of Sociology’.

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Conference Report on the Austrian-Czech Symposium ‘Where Does Work Stop, Where Does Life Begin? – The Transformation of Work in Austria and the Czech Republic’

Julia Gruhlich, Nicole Horáková

The world of work is changing rapidly. While this may not be a new discovery, it is still of high political, economic, cultural, and social relevance. The biggest trends include globalisation, transnationalisation, the digitalisation of work, and the flexibilisation of work with new standards for employment (e.g. part-time work, teleworking, positions with changing workplaces, virtual teamwork). In modern societies, the expectation